

The Emperor's new clothes

Don Shelton noted¹ that William Smellie and William Hunter obtained a considerable number of the bodies they illustrated in their Atlases by the process of 'burking' (i.e. murdering these women to order). According to Shelton 'The two atlases depict dissections of over 30 pregnant subjects, mainly in the ninth month of pregnancy'.

Hunter illustrated a total of five pregnant women, all of whom were of 9 months gestation. The first of these women died suddenly, in the year 1750. The second woman had placenta praevia, and her death was associated with 'flooding of blood'. A third woman possessed a full-term fetus with a breech presentation. A fourth woman possessed a full-term fetus. A fifth woman, after a natural labour, grew faint, and without any apparent cause, died two hours later. All of the other Plates displayed less than full-term fetuses.

Smellie's Atlas contained 39 Plates, many of which contained diagrams. A substantial proportion of the other Plates displayed similar fetuses, although in different positions. For example, in Plates 23 and 24 the same fetuses were observed, although the fetus in Plate 24, was shown delivered using forceps.

The incidence of maternal and fetal deaths during the 18th century among the lower classes was probably considerably more common than indicated by Shelton. According to Playfair,² the causes of sudden maternal death during the late 19th century were probably very similar to that occurring during Hunter's and Smellie's time. Such conditions included puerperal eclampsia and pelvic deformity due to rickets or osteomalacia of pregnancy, as well as cord prolapse. Haemorrhage before and during delivery might also occur, such as due to placenta praevia or placental separation, as well as haemorrhage after delivery. Accordingly, there would be no justification to indicate that their bodies were obtained by 'burking'.

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Competing interests
None declared

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William Smellie and William Hunter accused of murder ...

I fully endorse the quick responses of Wendy Moore and Tina Matthews to Don Shelton's paper, 'The Emperor's new clothes'.¹

Given some of the complicated midwifery cases illustrated, it would have been as difficult to seek out some of the examples of rare midwifery cases in the living and have them murdered 'to order' as to open up graves at random and find such cases.

William Smellie actually suggests, in the preface to *A sett of anatomical tables*, that the subjects had been 'prepared on purpose'. His sometime pupil Peter Camper records in his diary of 1761² that Dr Smellie's figures 'were not all from real life... The children are placed in pelves of women, the children themselves looked natural, but the other parts were copied from other preparations...' Camper claimed he had on several occasions used forceps to deliver a fetal head from a corpse and subsequently 'made careful drawings and profiles' before the mother's body was further dissected.

It becomes apparent in Hunter's work that the 34 plates were taken from 12 different subjects.³ Hunter was also adept at preserving specimens with wax and used plaster casts, as was the practice in certain cities of Europe. This economy in the use of cadavers to produce a series of illustrations was no doubt complemented by the skills of the artists and engravers involved, who may upon occasion have resorted to some degree of 'artistic licence'. Rymdyk, the main artist involved in the production of both the birth atlases also had lots of opportunity to become familiar with the subject material; not only did he draw for Smellie and Hunter but also for Nicholas Jenty,⁴ who incidentally reports one of his two pregnant subjects died near to term of a haemorrhage resulting from a diseased aorta and a lacerated pulmonary artery.

Historians aspire to contribute to a better understanding of the past and have 'obligations to their sources, their readers, the past and the public at large'.⁵ This is exemplified when those standing accused or maligned are no longer able to speak up for themselves, and become vulnerable to sensationalistic journalism.⁶

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Case not proven

Don Shelton's article¹ raises some interesting questions about the sources of William Hunter's and William Smellie's subjects for their obstetric atlases but it does not add up to a convincing case that they received murdered bodies. I cannot comment on Smellie's atlas, but it is not true that most of the subjects in Hunter's book were women in the final month of pregnancy. Hunter's atlas contains 34 plates of which the first 10 relate to just one woman, who died at full-term. Hunter refers in the text to two more women who died in or near their last month, amounting to a total of three women at full-term. But the point of the atlas was to depict pregnancy at all stages, so the book shows fetuses at various